

the other side of paradise

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/45270412) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/45270412>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Dream SMP , Video Blogging RPF , Minecraft (Video Game)
Relationships:	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , TommyInnit & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade , Kristin Rosales Watson/Phil Watson , (background)
Characters:	TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson Philza , Wilbur Soot , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Foster Family , Foster Care , Foster Parent Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Foster Child Wilbur Soot , Foster Child Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Good Parent Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Accidental Neglect , Sad TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Jealous TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Hurt TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Hurt Wilbur Soot , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot and Technoblade and TommyInnit are Siblings , Sleepy Bois Inc-centric , Sleepy Bois Inc as Family , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Arguing , Traumatized Wilbur Soot , TommyInnit Gets a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , Fluff and Angst , Angst with a Happy Ending , Child Neglect
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-02-23 Words: 18,647 Chapters: 1/1

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by [allieae](#)

Summary

“Tom, wait,” Phil says, fingers curling around Tommy’s arm. Tommy barely catches himself from ripping away. Phil frowns. “Kiddo. What’s going on?”

Tommy feels Techno and Wilbur staring at him. He burns.

“Nothing you’d care about.”

Phil flinches.

~

or, after Phil takes in Wilbur and Techno, Tommy feels unloved. He spirals.

Notes

woahhh im back off my writing grind to present a FOSTER AU

this was written in part because I hit 8k on twitter, because I won a poll, and also because I've been thinking about this au for ages. please enjoy :)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [El otro lado del paraíso](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

Tommy stays up until midnight with his report card clutched carefully in his hands.

He waits, poised by his door, for the perfect opportunity to catch his dad and show him the straight line of Bs (with one C+) marching down the page in a uniform line of ink. He's doing so much better in his classes.

(And maybe that's because of Techno's tutoring, or maybe it's because he's spent a lot of time at school recently, wanting to be away from the house, give his new foster brothers space and all—)

But he's doing better. Phil is going to be so proud.

...if he ever gives Tommy the chance to show him.

Another half hour creeps by. Tommy's limbs grow stiff from where he's perched by his deliberately-cracked-open door, waiting like a tiger or some shit. It's probably stupid to be so... *desperate* to earn a piece of his dad's time, but well. Maybe he's desperate.

He just misses him. Stupidly, maybe selfishly, Tommy has missed Phil.

Phil hasn't gone anywhere, and Tommy misses him.

He knows it's stupid.

That doesn't stop him from lunging up the minute he hears Wilbur's door creak open. He hears Phil bid him a quiet, '*Night, mate*, as he steps into the hallway. They'd been talking about colleges Wilbur could apply to in the next year, or something like that. Tommy hadn't really paid enough attention to remember.

All that matters is that Phil and Tommy haven't been able to have their Talk of the Day, and Tommy actually has good news this time, and if he can just have five minutes—

Phil doesn't turn towards Tommy's room. Tommy watches his silhouette edge towards his own room, and panic flutters like a little bird in his chest.

Tommy pops his head out the doorway. He hangs off the door with one hand, heart beating quickly. The other hand is curled around the report card. His sweaty palms stick to the paper.

"Dad?"

Phil turns. He blinks a few times before he sees Tommy in the near-dark.

"Hey, Tom. What's up?"

Tommy has to bite the inside of his cheek when Phil has to ask. Then he lets it go, because it's stupid. He can't grieve every spiderweb crack of change that has consumed the house. At some point, he has to get used to it.

“I just wanted to talk,” he admits. “You know, about school and stuff.”

He squeezes his report card hard enough to bend the paper. It sounds even stupider the minute it falls off his tongue. Tommy knows that, even as he knows pure, heavy, bitter disappointment when Phil’s face falls.

He knows. Just by that look he knows.

Anger slices and scabs over like a wound in his chest. Open and forced closed in an instant.

“Ah... it’s kind of late,” he sighs, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “You okay with checking in tomorrow?”

It’s almost enough to make Tommy flinch. His heart sinks low, low, low in his chest.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “Yeah, tomorrow’s fine.”

There won’t be any talks tomorrow.

There never is. Forgotten things don’t get remembered anymore. They just get buried. Tommy’s hands are covered in dirt and calluses from all the shovelling he’s done.

Phil smiles, tired and frayed in the lowlight. Tommy tries to smile back. If only for Phil.

“I love you, Dad,” he says.

The words prickle numbly in his mouth.

“Love you, Tommy. Goodnight.”

It’s all the right words. Tommy knows Phil means them. So why do they ring so hollowly through the hallway? Why does Tommy’s heart deflate when the door to Phil’s bedroom snicks shut with a quiet whisper?

(So why can’t Tommy stop being selfish?)

He doesn’t know the answer to any of those things. And with Phil gone, even if he’s just a few meters away, all of Tommy’s pent up energy goes with him. Fizzles out like a dud firecracker, leaving soot stains on the ground and not much else.

The report card ends up forgotten in his backpack, crumpled and bent out of shape but no longer important. It’s just a piece of paper. Not half as important as college essays.

So Tommy goes to bed.

He goes to bed with a gnawing ball of guilt in his stomach, and the oil-spill sensation that tomorrow he will wake up and do all of this again. He hopes that next time he can do it better.

B.T.W (Before Techno and Wilbur)

Tommy lets Phil pretend nothing is up for about ten minutes.

He sits, rambling idly in the booth, when the waiter takes their orders, and he doesn't bring it up.

When the drinks are set in front of them with a dainty *clink*, he doesn't say anything either. He doesn't even remark on how Phil keeps shooting him *looks*, like he's making sure Tommy's still in front of him – as if Phil hadn't just pulled him out of school early expressly for... whatever this is.

In fact, Tommy is halfway through his cheeseburger-no-tomatoes before he breaks.

“We're at mom's diner.”

Phil startles, hand curled around his glass. “Oh,” he says, as if he's just noticed. “Yes, we are.”

Tommy shoves down the knot of worry that tries to roll around in his gut. He plucks a fry off the plate in front of him, fiddling with it but never quite bringing it to his mouth. He doesn't know if he can stomach anything until he figures this out.

“We only come here for her birthday or something important,” Tommy reminds Phil slowly. He meets his father's gaze, shoulders ducked. “...Did something happen?”

Phil's eyes widen. The tension clinging to him like a shell of ice breaks as he shoots upright in the seat so fast Tommy almost recoils.

“No!” he half-laughs in surprise. “No, no nothing happened, Tom. Everything's okay.”

Everything's okay.

Tommy hadn't said anything *wasn't*. He sets his fry down next to his abandoned burger. Doubt pours off him in waves.

“But–” Phil says, and Tommy stills. He places his clasped hands on the table. “Well. I know I've talked to you about expanding the family.”

The family, Tommy thinks, almost with a laugh. Phil means their little unit of two – their little binary star system on a wobbly orbit, barely in harmony without the gravity of their third little star. Tommy and Phil, the way it's been for months.

“You pregnant, dad?”

The words burst out of him, louder than his worry. Phil blinks, and then the anxiety on his expression burns away to a disappointed (*amused*) frown.

“No, you little shit.”

Tommy gives him a shit-eating grin. “It’s a *fair question*, innit—”

“Zip it.”

Tommy does. Only because Phil looks one more joke away from passing out. Only because of that.

Phil shakes his head, a dizzy look on his face. “Sorry, just—” He smiles, wide and surprising. “Well, you remember how I’ve been taking training courses to foster?”

Tommy stills. Recognition floods him, followed by a clinging sensation that he knows where this is going. Still, he indulges Phil’s nervousness, the way he wrings his hands and smiles at Tommy like the stretch of his mouth is a line of sutures – stitches to hold himself together. If he had feathers, they’d be ruffled, Tommy’s sure.

But there’s an undeniable light in his eyes. One that gleams and sparkles even through Phil’s hesitation, a scattered sunbeam trying to hide behind clouds.

One that has Tommy saying, “Yes?”

Of course he knows.

Why do you have to train to be a dad? he sniped one day, nauseous with secondhand anxiety while he watched, with buried grief, Phil dismantle both his office and the guest bedroom (the one mom decorated) to make room for potential placements. *You already have me. And I’m fuckin’ epic.* (A disapproving stare.) *What more do you have to prove?*

Phil smiled at him in that dazed, distracted, tired, loving way. *It’s not that simple, kiddo*, he’d said, but he’d reached out and ruffled Tommy’s hair, and Tommy leaned into him, and everything was okay. *Foster kids can come with challenges. Not in a bad way, just—*

I get it, dad.

And he had.

Because even though Tommy’s grief was inscribed in the paint strokes of Kristin’s paintings as Phil pulled them off the walls, moving them into the attic for safekeeping, Phil’s passion was written into mandatory classes and advice books and the neutral grey paint he’d hidden Mom’s sunny yellow behind in the guest room.

(Mom always wanted to foster.)

Phil’s smile breaks free of the clouds. “I was approved.”

The news comes out of him in a breathless, guilty rush. Tommy’s eyebrows shoot up towards his hairline. He leans forward, hunger forgotten, because this is exciting. This is the first time his dad has lived since Mom died.

“I passed the home inspection,” Phil adds. He scrubs a hand through his hair. “And the background check, of course, and– well.” A pink flush, ripe with happiness, blossoms over his face. That shine is back, twinkling and reaching right into Tommy’s chest – infectious. “They already have a placement for me.”

Tommy blinks, lips parting. “That– that fast?”

Phil nods. “Two boys, teenagers. Twins.”

Twins, Tommy mouths. Siblings.

He stifles his own slice of building excitement behind a frown.

“Are they older than me?” he demands.

“They’re about two years away from graduating,” Phil’s lips quirk up with amusement, “so yes.”

“Fuck.”

Tommy’s fourteen. That means they’re at *least* sixteen.

“But they like Minecraft,” Phil adds, and oh, he’s won him over and he knows it. Not that Tommy would’ve complained, per se, but he knows what one of his stupid jokes can do to Phil’s anxiety. Topple it. “I figured I can set them up to share your old PC.”

Tommy nods. He can’t help the fizzy feeling running through him, like soda injected into his veins. He doesn’t know if it’s good or bad. His fingers tap quickly on the table.

On one hand, he *is* excited.

The prospect of having two new people in their too-quiet house to make things loud again (or at least loud-*er*) is almost euphoric. Maybe he can show them Skywars, if they don’t already play. Or Bedwars. Or just– *all* of Hypixel.

On the other... he’s gotten too used to him and Phil. To being just a *son*. What if he’s not any good at being a foster brother? What if they don’t even want him to be?

I figured I can set them up to share your old PC, Phil said. So, he’d already thought about this then. Tommy doesn’t know why that gives him pause. And Phil seems to notice, he always notices these things about Tommy, never letting him break alone, because his eyes grow very sad.

“Tommy,” he starts, with that hesitant, *I am going to therapize you except I’m your dad, so it’s not therapy, it’s just parenting* voice. “I want you to know you can always say no. I haven’t accepted anything yet. I know it might be too soon.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“I know.” Endlessly patient, endlessly gentle. Tommy has had it all his life, but sometimes he doesn’t know how to handle that. Phil bores into him with a soft stare. “I’m saying it. I don’t want you to feel like I’m moving on too quickly, or–”

Pain lashes through his chest. Tommy squeezes his hands into fists.

“You’re not,” he cuts him off. His head spins a little bit. “I know you’re not.”

“I didn’t expect it to happen this quick,” Phil admits. “But now that it has...”

Tommy nods. “That’s good, though, innit? That they want you to foster them.”

He tries his very best to cauterize the guilt lacing through his father. It’s not fair for him to be guilty over this. He’s not even moving on. He’s just... growing. Growth happens in all directions, sideways and scattered, not just forward and away.

“Yes,” Phil says, growing suddenly stormy. He twists the two wedding bands still eternally committed to his hand. “These boys... they’ve been through a lot. More than most kids.” Tommy’s stomach grows heavy. Phil sighs. “For them, it’s us or a group home.”

Tommy has never been to a group home. Still, the idea fills him with a weighted sense of unpleasantness. Pity, even – though he attempts to evade that particular emotion.

“What about...”

He trails off right as he realizes the stupidity of that question. He spoke without thinking. Shame dusts his nose pink. Luckily, Phil doesn’t seem mad about it. Just sad.

“No family,” Phil shakes his head. “This isn’t a matter of reunification, kiddo. We’d be all they have until they’re old enough to apply to colleges and then, well... do what they want to do.”

Oh, Tommy thinks with a wilted frown. Grief stabs at him, sharp and sudden. Because now he’s thinking of mom, of losing her – how he doesn’t know how much of him would be left standing without Phil. How his could-be foster brothers have withstood all that and probably more.

It carves a chasm through him – one Phil probably notices but doesn’t point out. Tommy balls his fists up, the decision made right there and then. They might not be able to fix everything, but the least he can do is offer them as much love as he can. Between him and Phil, he thinks they have enough of it.

(Of course, it’s not that simple. He’d learn that later. But it felt that simple. His dad always has a way of breaking down the big problems into tiny, digestible ones.)

Phil twists his rings again, anxious. Something beats at the inside of Tommy’s chest, begging him to get it to stop. He doesn’t want to see Phil so vulnerable. Tommy shifts, his tongue moving in time with his weeping heart.

“It means they need it even more, right?” He swallows, fingers still *tap tap tapping* away. “You should say yes.” Tommy squeezes his hands tighter, watching the blood run away from his knuckles, turning them white. He looks up as he relieves the pressure, fingers straightening. “Whatever makes you– and *them*– happy.”

Tommy feels almost breathless after speaking. Like he’s traversed some big, swaying, fragile bridge over an endless height and somehow made it across.

Phil stares at him.

And then he glows, light beaming through him.

“I’m so proud of you, Tom,” he breathes. Tommy goes red. Phil stands, wrestling to pull him up into a hug before Tommy is over his surprise. He smacks a big kiss onto Tommy’s hair. “You’re such a good kid, you know that?”

Tommy flushes deeper, but he melts into Phil’s unwavering embrace. If there were any tiny fractures scattered inside him, they close over.

“I’m the best,” he agrees, a little shakily.

But Phil just nods, *agreeing* with him. He lets him go after Tommy puts up a fake-fight. That vibrant light is back in his eyes. But he doesn’t go far.

Tommy feels oddly exposed in the middle of the cafe.

“We’ll figure this out,” Phil sighs, and it seems to come easier. Some of that misplaced pride lingers in that loose breath. “It might not be easy, but we’ll make it work. We always do. Yeah?”

Tommy nods. And he means it. He really does.

A tiny smile creeps onto his face. He gives Phil a little crooked shrug.

“I’ve always wanted a brother.”

And that’s that.

—

He doesn’t expect to love them so easily.

But Wilbur and Techno are cool. They’re quiet, at first, hovering close to each other like they’ve never had space to drift apart. Their jokes are mostly inside, deep inside, exchanged to each over dinners through text messages or whispers that make the other smile.

Tommy recognizes it. It’s kind of like what he and Phil have, like *this is all I have, this is who I am built of*.

He likes it better when they share it with Tommy – not that he ever expects them too.

Phil might think so, but Tommy's not an idiot. He's loud, but only about the unimportant things. He's pushy, but only where he knows they want to bend but don't know how to.

He rambles when he knows Wilbur wants white noise, and he's silent where Techno won't admit that he got overstimulated five seconds after Tommy broke a glass at the same time an ambulance screeched by the house.

Wilbur drives them all to school, and Tommy makes a point to learn the words to all the songs he plays, and he only fights for shotgun when he wants to make Techno laugh.

He even lets Wilbur kill him a few times in Bedwars.

(Not Techno. He doesn't have to let Techno, because Techno demolishes him every time. It's not even close – Techno is *scary good* at PVP. But Tommy can't even be mad because those are the times that Techno gives him his fullest laughs and broadest smiles and those feel better than any win he could earn on his own.)

So, yeah. Loving the twins doesn't come quickly, and definitely not all the way, and it doesn't even come unscathed. Tommy knows there's a wall between them. Some sort of separation that reminds him that the edges of their puzzle pieces might align perfectly, but they don't match with his.

But it's sort of there. That affection. Tommy likes hanging out with them. Most of the time. When they let him.

Still, Tommy's biggest problems don't ever seem to come from Wilbur or Techno. He accepts pretty quickly that he doesn't fit together perfectly with them – which is *fine*. He's not saying it isn't.

But it's still weird when his biggest problems seem to come from Phil. Not because his dad is doing anything wrong. But that he's not doing the things he's supposed to do right... right. Half the time, he doesn't even do them at all.

Tommy hates it. He hates himself for hating it, but he hates it.

Wilbur and Techno move in with them, and the house feels louder, and brighter, and bigger.

Tommy starts feeling smaller.

Like the yellow walls Phil had painted over, the daily talks they don't have anymore.

He bottles it up. Of course he does. He keeps that horrible poison to himself, where he's the only one that it can slowly burn through. He loves his dad too much to ever utter his thoughts (fears) aloud, and he thinks he could love Techno and Wilbur the same way if they want him to, so he keeps it from them too. Until he can't.

Until that rot starts leaking out of him.

Until he can't stitch up the gaps in his heart faster than he can earn them.

Until, at some point, he stops doing so good.

—

Tommy gets alone time with Phil for the first time in what feels like forever, and his heart *soars*.

The couch has never felt softer than it does when he clambers onto it, snagging half of Phil's blanket as he goes to drag over his lap. Shitty microwave popcorn has never tasted better than it does when there's a bowl shared between their laps. Hell, Tommy doesn't even care that Phil picked a movie Tommy wouldn't even have looked towards. It's as good as Spider-Man when it's just them watching it.

He curls up right against his dad's shoulder as the opening credits fade into the meat of the movie, and he's warm. So warm. This is what he's been craving.

Phil lets out a little laugh when Tommy scoots up right next to him. "Feeling clingy today, mate?"

Tommy laughs, but it sort of hurts. Phil has no clue just how true his words ring. But Tommy can't even be mad at him. He can't be anything more than hungrily content like this.

"Mhm," he mumbles.

He's tired. The sleepiness makes itself known not far into the movie; Tommy can never quite keep his eyes open once it gets dark.

(Wilbur and Techno joke about it all the time, how Tommy would rather fall asleep in their rooms than risk missing out.

You're like a little baby, Wilbur remarked one time, patting Tommy's cheek as Tommy's eyes drooped. *Once it gets dark*— he made a whooshing sound with his lips, *Lights out for Tommy*.

Shut up, Wil, Tommy found the energy to dully snipe.

Techno laughed, throwing a blanket over Tommy's shoulders. Tommy instantly lost his fight.

Point proven, Techno rumbled. He'd been smiling, or something close to it.

Those were the moments that Tommy adored. Those are the ones he clings to whenever he gets too... in his own head. Those are the ones that make his guilt feel like a living thing ripping through him.)

Phil doesn't make fun of him. His dad is too soft for that.

He just pulls Tommy close, lets him use his shoulder as a pillow like he'd done when he was a little kid, and plays with his hair.

And oh, if Tommy wasn't tired before, this is enough to cripple him. This is enough affection to keep him full for another few days. It's so easy to tip into all the love that Phil extends

him.

Tommy floats in a golden haze.

Time isn't a real thing where he goes, but it doesn't need to be. That means his fears aren't real here, either, and Tommy's just fine with that.

He's aware of everything and nothing at once. He's distantly aware of the movie chatter, of the way Phil's chest moves against him when he laughs at a joke.

He is painfully aware of when it cracks down the middle.

When Wilbur's voice pulls him up out of the haze, floating in from the doorway.

Tommy's eyes crack open as the gold burns around him. He forces himself awake enough to catch exactly what Wilbur's saying, and then he wishes he didn't.

"—if you're not busy. I just wanted a second opinion on this essay."

Tommy's gaze slides foggily towards Wilbur. He leans into the doorway, eyes flicking around the room. They land on Tommy for just a moment before passing right through. Tommy's chest tightens.

He's not even stepping through the doorway, but he's punching right into him. The death knell falls when Phil sits up, dislodging Tommy on his shoulder.

"It's for college, right?" his father asks, lips curved into a frown.

Wilbur nods a few times. "Just a sample one. I know I won't be applying 'till next year, but..."

Yeah, Tommy thinks instantly, surprising himself. *So find another time. We're busy.*

He has to bite the inside of his cheek to make sure that doesn't come out. His heart races, like he's been caught stealing from a cookie jar. At least he stopped himself. The only thing worse than thinking that would've been saying that.

Still, he can't help but glance helplessly at Phil, praying, fingers crossed under the blanket, that he says no.

Maybe another time, mate, he might say, in Tommy's dreams. *I'm a little busy.*

He'd say it Tommy.

But not to Wilbur. Never to Wilbur, never to Techno. Not about things like this. Tommy knows how much it means to him that Wilbur can come to him about things like that. About college essays and girl problems and all sorts of semi-permanent things.

So it really shouldn't split Tommy apart the way it does.

Phil jumps up from the sofa. Tommy watches him rise, eyes unfocused. He feels, ridiculously, like he's witnessing the end of the world.

"Of course, mate. I can look it over."

He doesn't even look back as he goes. Tommy's heart wilts into a tiny, shrunken pulp. He's not tired anymore. He's too awake, actually. He wants to be asleep right now. He doesn't want to see this.

As a last, desperate attempt, Tommy lunges for the remote. He slams his finger down on the pause button, wishing he could freeze time with the movie.

And then Phil finally looks at him. At the remote.

He takes it out of Tommy's unprotesting fingers and presses Play. He tosses it down on the mused blankets. Tommy blinks at it. He stares right through it, but can't lift his eyes away.

"No need to pause," Phil assures him. To his credit, he seems somewhat apologetic. A hand lands on his shoulder; Tommy almost flinches. "I'll be back in a minute, yeah?"

He looks to Wilbur for reassurance. Wilbur nods. Phil smiles.

Tommy decays. There's no other word for the way he sinks down against the sofa with limbs that don't feel like they belong to him. He's cold. He could have a million blankets, and he'd still be cold.

But he doesn't protest – he never does.

"Okay," he whispers, hardly a croak. "Okay."

Phil doesn't seem to hear him.

Tommy feels Wilbur's gaze burning into the side of his face once Phil moves, giving him a clear line of sight. He has to stare very hard at his lap to keep from returning it. He'd only be pinning Wilbur with a twisted, vicious jealousy. And Tommy can't bring himself to do that.

Tommy falls asleep before Phil gets back.

He wakes up in the middle of the night with a blanket tucked carefully around his shoulders, TV screen dark, movie off, popcorn bowl moved away.

Blinking into the dark of the silent living room makes his eyes well up.

Tommy slams back down onto the sofa, shoving his face into the pillow Phil must've given him before he'd turned in for the night (after he'd left Tommy down here alone.) He won't let himself cry, not all the way. It stings to keep himself together but he bears it.

There's nothing worth crying about. Not even himself.

Techno asks him about it the next day.

They're tutoring. Tommy loves tutoring with him. Techno is an endless basin of patience: putting up with Tommy's jokes, laughing if Tommy is being funny enough, but keeping him focused enough to get his homework done.

And he's smart. Like, really smart. He makes algebra seem actually doable. Tommy was half convinced his teacher was making it up.

He answers all Tommy's questions. He doesn't usually direct his own at Tommy. But something must be in the air, because this time, Techno does.

"Wilbur thinks he upset you," Techno remarks casually, picking at his nails as Tommy fights through a page of homework.

Tommy freezes, hand still wrapped around his pencil. "Wha- what?"

Techno doesn't look at him directly. But his voice carries a hesitation Tommy doesn't hear from him often. So he listens, even as his words prickle as they pass over Tommy's ears.

"He thinks he upset you because he interrupted your movie night."

He tilts his head. He seems oddly... scrupulous. He's edged away from Tommy, and Tommy is quickly reminded just how attached he is to his brother. His actual brother. Tommy watches this minute flicker of expressions all from his jaded peripheral.

Techno clears his throat. Tommy almost jumps, and Techno's brow furrows.

"...Did he upset you?"

Tommy stares at his paper. The pencil shakes in his hand.

"Wilbur's an idiot," he gets out. His mouth is so dry. "Everything's fine."

Techno stares at him. The way he does whenever Tommy gets a math problem wrong, and he's waiting for Tommy to notice it before he points it out.

Tommy doesn't want him to point out this time. And anyway, Tommy's not lying. Technically, everything's fine. Everything's grand and golden and peachy and all the other dumb expressions Phil uses all the time.

Everything is good.

That's the only way he'll allow things to be.

—

The worst part of trying to hate Techno and Wilbur Soot is that they don't make it easy.

In fact, they don't make it possible at all.

There's a messy, unshapen, angry thing in Tommy's chest that begs to erupt, begs to spill out of him. He wants to burn, and burn down with it, and maybe when he's totally engulfed, Phil will notice the dying light of his flames and think, *Oh, there you are.*

Things would get so much easier if he let go of all of this. Things would be so much easier if Wilbur and Techno would just *deserve* it.

But they don't. They don't deserve his fire and they don't deserve his wrath. They don't deserve anything except everything he has. And every time he realizes it, it buries him deeper.

Right now, Tommy may as well be six feet under.

It starts with a short chorus of knocks on his bedroom door, followed by a loud, bright, "*Oy, Tomay!*"

Wilbur.

A strange combination of emotions slam into him: a childish, candy-sweet excitement, and a bone-deep dread. It leaves him feeling like he just stepped off a fast-spinning roller coaster.

Tommy, busy decaying in his bed, eyes glazed as he mindlessly scrolls on his phone (anything to not think), looks up.

"Come on," he croaks, voice rough.

Wilbur pokes his head in, brown curls falling over his face. He stays carefully behind the invisible threshold of the door. Neither him or Techno ever walk into his room all the way without permission.

They're like vampires in that way. Something which, upon telling Phil, earned him a scolding (*you can't just call them vampires, Tommy, they're just respectful.*) Techno laughed though, his special high-pitched one whenever Tommy was *really funny*. Tommy took it as a win.

So, hovering just outside the room, Wilbur swipes the rebellious strands of hair out of his eyes. Tommy catches a glimpse of Techno over his shoulder, also in the hall. The sight of them restores some life into his bones. He sits up, hoping they won't see the long-dried tear tracks reddening his face.

He swipes at his cheekbones. They're dry. Which lets him say, "What's up?"

Wilbur smiles, half hesitant, half excited. (Tommy schools his face into stone.) He rattles his car keys in the doorway like a salesman.

"We're heading to the arcade. You coming?"

Tommy blinks. The arcade? He has to look over his shoulder for a second before can speak.

"Me?"

His voice cracks. Neither mention it. If anything, Techno's face softens. It's barely a twitch of an emotion. Tommy tries to shrink and bloom at the same time.

"Yeah, you," Wilbur says. "C'mon."

Warmth unfurls inside him, yellow roses wrapping around his bones. Tommy stands up, though he hesitates again.

"I need to ask—"

"Already asked Phil," Techno gruffs. "He said be back when it gets dark."

Oh — they'd thought that far ahead? He finds himself smiling.

"For quarters?"

Techno groans, and Tommy thinks it's his fault (with a small amount of terror) before Wilbur pulls out a bulging ziploc bag full of silver.

"Already stole Techno's!" he announces. Techno shakes his head. Wilbur's grin broadens. He wiggles the bag, producing some nice clinking. "We can share."

Tommy has to freeze. He has to.

He feels like he's just confronted a firework show, and the lights haven't formed into coherent shapes yet. His tongue is a useless lump of flesh in his mouth, and his limbs aren't connected to his body.

They want him to come. He who's spent the last two weeks wishing for more space from them. He who thought they hated him. (He who didn't, who still wouldn't, blame them.)

"Okay," he finally says, when the dazzling flashes have faded. He's still surprised, but not blinded. Not frozen still. "That... sounds fun."

Tommy surprises himself over how truthful that is. It does sound fun.

It's nice to be included.

Wilbur claps his hands. "Then let's go, losers!"

He spins around like a soldier general, marching out the door. Tommy surges forward to chase him like a shadow. There's an irrational voice in his head that says if Wilbur leaves his line of sight, he's leaving Tommy too. That none of this was any realer than Tommy's recent fantasies of being included.

But Techno's hand claps onto his shoulder the minute Tommy tries to burst through the doorway. He stills at once, fear flooding him.

For a tiny, guilty moment, he can't help but think the worst. Is this where they admit it was a prank? Is this where Techno laughs and says, *Did you really think we'd want you to come?*

He can hardly breathe as he waits for Techno to speak.

“Tommy,” Techno says, low in a way that sends chills rippling over him.

Tommy slowly lifts his eyes up. Techno frowns down at him. The hallway holds its breath. And then releases it.

“You’re not wearin’ shoes.”

“What?”

Tommy looks down. His heart still rings in his ears – up until the moment he confronts his socked feet. Relief slams into him, followed by a deep red flush.

“Oh.”

Techno snorts, patting his shoulders. Tommy runs back to grab his shoes, and he leaves his worries behind.

When he shuffles into the backseat of Wilbur’s car, Wilbur hands Tommy his phone, and that makes him pause again.

“Pick a song,” Wil says, not looking at him.

“I get to pick?”

He’s almost embarrassed at how frail that sounds. He doesn’t miss the way Wilbur shoots Techno a look before twisting around to face him.

“No Able Sisters or I’m kicking you out.”

Tommy splutters. He is alive again.

“That was a *joke*–”

“I don’t care. That’s your only warning.”

Tommy laughs – it only strains a little bit – and looks down again.

Tommy’s thumb shakes as he blinks at Wilbur’s cracked phone screen. That strange, all-consuming white screen has taken over his mind again. He chooses one of the Los Camp songs Wilbur showed him.

He knows he’s made the right choice when Wilbur perks up, shooting him a grin in the rearview.

Tommy sinks into the backseat. His body shakes – Atlas releasing all the pressure of the world.

He has half a mind to close his eyes, tilt his head against the window, and just relax. Soak in this moment until he’s full off it. If he acts like this doesn’t matter, it’ll last longer.

As they screech out of the driveway, Tommy is over the moon. Maybe it's because he was chosen, for once, and he didn't even have to beg. Or maybe it's the fact that being next to Wilbur and Techno makes him feel the exact same way as he does when he's with Phil. Like family.

Tommy doesn't know. All he knows is that as the music grows louder, pushing away all of the bad thoughts that try to plague him, a realization grows louder with it.

Maybe there was never a choice to be made at all. Maybe he can have both.

He thinks about the arcade all night as he tries to get himself to sleep. Of Techno helping him cheat at all the games (when he wasn't obliterating him) and Tommy winning Wilbur a lopsided antelope plush just to fuck with him and Wilbur subtly dipping into his allowance to buy Tommy an inhumane amount of cotton candy, just to make the night stretch longer.

He thinks about all of this and how it's everything he wants but still feels like something he doesn't have.

(Being so warm and not-lonely only makes him feel lonelier once he's alone.)

The guilt sneaks up on him. It always finds him when he's tired. Because when he's tired is when the bad thoughts get worse. And tonight, they say, *You had fun because Phil wasn't there. You had fun because you weren't in anyone's shadow. You had fun because you couldn't be selfish.*

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut for ten minutes before the ringing in his ears subsides.

He only produces one real strand of thought before sleep drags him down:

It was nice not being chosen last. If only to let himself sleep, he lets that be enough.

—

His breaking point comes on the last Thursday of the month.

In a way, Tommy expects it. He grieves it the week leading up to it, and then the morning, the afternoon, and his grief doubles when it gets exactly what it expects.

It's been the tradition even before mom died: homemade dinner, something *new*, every last Thursday. Something that they make together, and then eat together. Just a day for them.

It used to be a constant. Even when Wilbur and Techno moved in, Tommy and Phil still had last-Thursday dinners. They were shorter, yes, and sometimes Phil had to leave in the middle to pick up Techno from therapy, but they still had them.

But this month is different.

Tommy knows it, knows the way a deer knows the hard impact of death as it stares into the headlights of a truck – long before the truck even grazes it. Knows the way he's known

movie nights, and Talk of the Days, and all the little things that he shouldn't obsess over but does.

That doesn't mean Tommy's not stupid. He's been acting stupid, *feeling* stupid, for half a year. And he might know loss before he sees it, but he doesn't know how to throw up a white flag. He doesn't know how to tell his heart to stop staring at a speeding truck and thinking, just this once, it'll swerve and miss him.

Tommy is a deer, and he runs into the middle of the road, and stands there, and waits, and he can't make himself move. Because just for a moment, before that sweet sting of impact, there is twice as much light as usual.

And when Thursday comes, his hands are red with fresh tomato sauce he battles through a Youtube tutorial to make and his shirt is dusted with flour.

Homemade lasagna.

He is making homemade lasagna and damn it it's going to be the best lasagna Phil has ever had.

Wilbur and Techno disappear the moment they drop him off from school, citing plans or whatever, meaning the house is totally empty besides him. (That's not a bad thing, necessarily. It's something Tommy is used to.)

Phil usually takes these Thursdays off – except when he can't get out of work which must be what is happening now, and so that's why he's not home when Tommy is and that's why Tommy's the one who has to walk to the corner store to pick up ingredients and that's why Tommy forces himself not to think about it.

Phil will be home by seven. He will.

Still, Tommy sets his phone up in the kitchen to blare music as loud as he can. Anything to keep the slow trawl of suffocating silence away.

Tommy distracts the anticipating ache of his heart with trying to figure out how the fuck to make the pasta flat. He beats the dough with numb fists and smashes it all down and then rolls it out with a wooden roller. The big rectangles of dough turn out okay.

Maybe it's because he's had enough practice doing this same stomp-down motion to his emotions. Or maybe he's just a good cook.

Fear starts to needle into him when he looks out the window and sees violet begin to stain the sky. He has to freeze for a moment as the sun sinks low behind the horizon. Tommy breaks himself out of his daze, throat tight.

He blasts the music louder.

Phil doesn't even need to be home yet. The lasagna still has to bake. He'll probably have to leave it there a little longer than the tutorial bake time, anyway, because the sauce had turned out kinda watery and he still has bread to slather with garlic.

It's fine.

The sky grows darker. 7 p.m.

Tommy's not panicking when the lasagna begins to cool and the bread even more so and the driveway remains hauntingly empty. He's not.

8 p.m.

The reason he stumbles to find something to do – string lights, he should put up some lights – is because he wants to make this dinner special. Mom used to go crazy with the decorations when the family dinners had been meant for three and not two. Themes and folded napkins and all that shit.

(Never candles though. There were no more real candles allowed at the table after the Tommy Incident in middle school.)

8:30.

Tommy sets the table. He serves two plates. Lays the silverware all nice and fancy (9 p.m.). Folds napkins. Unfolds them. His napkin craftsmanship is as shitty as his will to admit that the dinner was as good as over two hours ago.

9:15.

He sets out two extra plates for Techno and Wilbur. Just in case.

10.

He eats a slice of lasagna when the sky darkens to a full, deep, empty black. (It had gone dark before that. Tommy just refused to face it.) By then, he's too hungry to resist.

He turns his music off (10:15), though each scrape of his fork against the plate makes him flinch when it rings out so loud in the quiet.

The lasagna tastes like ash. Phil probably wouldn't have liked it.

Tommy cleans up the kitchen by eleven. He's nothing but a wind-up doll as he starts on it, robotically forcing himself through each task.

If he thinks while he scrubs the lasagna pan, he'll cry. So he doesn't think.

If he looks out the window onto the empty driveway, he won't be able to start the dishwasher. So he keeps his eyes down.

If he confronts the fatal sensation of his heart splitting apart, it'll hurt. So he's not Tommy. He's not someone who was left behind. And these shaking hands do not belong to him.

He puts the string lights in the hall closet, un-makes the table, and he only takes a break one time when his eyes get too blurry with tears to let him see properly.

“Don’t cry,” he pleads with himself, lips hardly moving. He leans over the counter, folding his arms under him to lay his head on and pressing his forehead against the counter. It’s cold. “Don’ttt fucking cry.”

He doesn’t. Tears won’t make Phil come home. Tears won’t remind Phil that it’s Thursday. And tears salvage the long-cooled lasagna buried in the trash can.

Besides, what’s the point? Why cry over something his dad clearly didn’t even spare an apologetic text message for? If Phil thinks it’s unimportant, maybe it is. Maybe it’s just another thing Tommy needs to learn to grieve.

He doesn’t care. It’s just a stupid dinner. He was probably just waiting for an excuse to put an end to them. He was probably hoping that Tommy would stop clinging so violently and absolutely to stupid, childish traditions, just like he does with every dead thing in his life—clings—

By the time the faint orange glow of headlights blazes across the frosty glass windows above the sink, the kitchen looks untouched. As empty and lifeless as Tommy feels.

For some reason, he’s feeling particularly masochistic, so Tommy stands by the door. He puts himself in point-blank range of the disappointment that is almost guaranteed to stab into him. *Do it quick*, Tommy throws a hollow prayer out to the unanswering wind. *Kill my hopes before they sprout.*

Ironically, he doesn’t even need to see Phil for his hopes to be put down like cattle. It’s the slam of car doors and footsteps and then, finally, laughter that grows slowly audible

He’s laughing. And not just him—Wilbur and Techno are there too. They were together, then. This whole time, while Tommy was alone thinking Phil was at work and Wilbur and Techno were doing... well, whatever they do, they were together. And now they’re laughing together.

Here Tommy is, lamenting his tears, and they are laughing. At least that dries his tear ducts right up. Every single part of him that doesn’t need to be conscious goes dormant. A shell— isn’t that what they call people like him?

He’s glad he hadn’t really let himself believe that something had come up, torn Phil away against his will. Tommy is really, really tired of taking blows today.

The door opens. Phil, Techno and Wilbur stumble in a bright clump. The laughter cuts out like a record breaking. Tommy presses himself against the nearest wall. Anything to remain upright.

Phil’s eyes light up when he sees him. There’s not enough light in the world that could warm Tommy, now. Especially not fake light.

“Oh, hey Tommy,” his dad says pleasantly.

Tommy’s throat bobs. He says nothing.

He knows, in the span of time it takes for his heart to beat once, that Phil completely forgot. If not because of the fuzzy, happy look on his face, the glow *radiating* off of him – Techno and Wilbur make Phil happier than Tommy ever does – then because of what he’s holding.

Phil has takeout in his hands. Chinese food, judging by the bags. The scent makes Tommy’s stomach flip. The lasagna he’d eaten earlier becomes leaden in his stomach. He could throw up right here. He almost does.

(He wonders if Phil would finally *look* at him if he fell apart like that. He discards that thought quick enough. If falling apart is the only way to have his father back, then does he really have him?)

A tinny ringing sound pierces through the cotton blanketing Tommy’s skull. Everything in the doorway is edged with a clinging, heatwave haze.

“Sorry mate,” Phil sighs, and hope is born and killed in Tommy’s chest. “Lost track of time with the boys.” He hefts a laugh as Tommy flinches. In an instant, he feels twin sets of eyes on him. Two heavy, identical gazes he will not meet. “I got your favorite, though, kiddo. You hungry?”

Tommy nods (it’s a lie; he’s not hungry because he ate, and if he hadn’t, his appetite would be rotting with the rest of him anyway.) But his indulgence of Phil’s question makes him feel better than honestly would’ve. He doesn’t need to worry him. If Phil wants to care, he can do it on his own.

“Thanks,” Tommy croaks.

Phil’s smile broadens. He reaches out, brushing a quick (loving? Something like it) hand over his hair as he sweeps by towards the kitchen to set the food down. He doesn’t see Tommy stiffen, an aborted attempt to jerk away.

(He doesn’t see Tommy at all.)

Then Phil’s gone, a comet vanishing into the dark.

Tommy doesn’t move for a few long seconds. He just sort of... exists, staring vacantly at the hardwood between his feet. He takes in every chip, every speck of dust, every bounce of light off the glaze. He stays there for so long that he’s sure, passively, Wilbur and Techno would’ve left. Followed Phil into the kitchen. Anything.

Instead, he gets a tiny voice and a question he doesn’t know the answer to.

“Tommy?” Wilbur says. “...you okay?”

Disconnected from his body, Tommy moves his head to the side. Wilbur is watching him, fidgeting with his hands. Tommy spots him twisting the shitty plastic ring Tommy had picked out for him at the arcade. He thinks it’d send a bolt through his chest if there were enough of him left to feel it.

The question makes his breath hitch.

Instantly, the urge to laugh strikes him.

Am I okay? he'd choke, in a world where he is not dissolving in place. *Do I look okay? I'm dying.*

He doesn't say that. In fact, if he could move his mouth to say anything, it'd be, *You noticed?*

(Phil didn't.)

He can't do that either. Not under the weight of the worry wrinkled between Techno's brows, or the anxious tapping of Wilbur's shoes. Not when the fact that his foster brothers noticed before Phil did has sent him closer to the brink. He has one leg hanging off of it.

(Because the thing is, Tommy must be making it easy. He can feel himself shaking. The ice consuming his skin tells him that he must be five shades paler. And Phil always said he could tell when Tommy was about to cry because he'd get a certain tremble in his chin, a twitch in his nose, and Tommy has felt both of those things, which is why he's been clenching his jaw for twenty minutes.)

Tommy doesn't give a damn if Wilbur or Techno notice. He wants Phil to. And he doesn't even get that.

So he nods, obsessively and minutely, and backs away. Away from them, away from concern they have no right bearing, away from where his fall-apart would be public.

"See you in a minute," he coughs as an excuse.

He won't be back in a minute.

He hears one last remark as he goes, drifting to him from Phil, from the kitchen, "*It's really clean in here,*" and that's enough. Nausea spikes up his throat. Tommy takes the stairs two at a time. He tries to stay quiet as he goes – be subtle about his graceless escape – though devastation does its best to bring him to his knees.

He realizes once he's upstairs that he never needed to be sneaky.

To sneak implies having someone watching out for him. Tommy doesn't have that. Hasn't for months.

Nobody looks at him as he drifts upstairs. Nobody cares when he doesn't come down.

Curled up on his bed, weak only where nobody can crucify him for it – that's where Tommy finally lets himself cry. Really cry. He cries like a baby, choking back tears and snuffing them into his pillow. He cries until there's snot on his nose, until his stomach hurts, until his lungs give out, refusing to bear another second of it.

He wants his mom. He wants his dad.

He wants to stop wanting.

And most of all, he wants to rest. He's tired of grieving things that nobody else would plant flowers for.

—

Tommy cries until he hates himself for crying, cries some more, and then falls asleep.

He's content to waste the night away, tossing and turning until his alarm drags him up for school. But just like the twins have interrupted every other facet of his life, they're apparently intent on interrupting his sleep too.

A knock taps against his door. It's just loud enough to rouse him and just gentle enough to pretend to ignore.

"Tommy?"

The low gruff of Techno's voice crushes Tommy's hope before it

Not Phil, he thinks blearily. *So not an apology.*

(Not even an acknowledgement that he remembered at all.)

He's too numb for the pain of that to really get worse. Tommy burrows further into his blankets. He waits for Techno to do the typical thing and leave him. When it doesn't happen right away, Techno's wavering shadow darkening his door, Tommy pokes his head up.

"Uh... I brought takeout. I noticed you didn't eat, so."

Tommy's heart squeezes. He lays himself back down. It's kindness he doesn't want from Techno, from Wilbur, from anyone else. Tommy stares at the ceiling, jaw locked. He's too tired to cry again.

"I'm just gonna... leave it here. Yeah."

Techno sounds like he's bobbing his head. There's a quiet crinkle of takeout-bag plastic as he sets something down. Tommy braces himself. He waits for the shadow to leave. Knowing Tommy's track record, it shouldn't take too long.

But Techno stays. For far longer than Tommy expects him to, he stays.

"...Tommy?"

He ignores that too.

He ignores the heavy, concerned sigh he hears make it past the door.

He ignores the tapering-off of Techno's footsteps, and the way his heart yearns for him to call Techno back. He can't indulge that.

He can't. Because if Tommy opened the door, he thinks Techno might actually comfort him. He thinks he'd cauterize the worst of Tommy's tangled-up thoughts. He might even sympathize with him. And that would make Tommy feel better. To even be heard would probably send him into a galaxy of peace.

So that's exactly why Tommy keeps his mouth shut, he's gotten good at that, and rolls over to try to wait out the torturous morning.

He's grown too used to rotting to feel comfortable doing anything else.

—

The quiet murmur of conversation dies the minute Tommy tromps into the kitchen. Phil's eyes raise over the coffee mug he lowers from his mouth.

"You're up early," Phil remarks, with no small amount of surprise.

The words go right past him. Tommy's gaze slides to Phil's left where Techno is sitting, a mug of his own warming his hands that cradle it. Just the sight of him sends nausea whipping through Tommy. A shell of ice encloses over his skin.

So Phil will do morning coffees with Techno, but not dinners with Tommy. Tommy doesn't know why he's still surprised. He shouldn't be. Things would be a lot easier if he could get his heart to stop aching whenever he confronts more proof that he's the odd one out now.

Techno catches the corner of his gaze. He tilts his head curiously. Tommy snaps his head around the other way.

None of that soft contemplation about Techno from last night has stayed. In fact, Tommy feels like he's lost a lot of himself between going to sleep and waking up. Like a corpse pulled out of a coffin: not all the pieces will remain intact.

And he is so, so far from intact.

Tommy grunts out an affirmation as he pockets an orange from the fruit bowl and slides it into his jacket pocket. He stomps over to the bread box next, yanking out a bag of bagels. His hands shake. He doesn't know why his hands are shaking.

That's when Phil sees his backpack.

"Are you leaving?" He sets his mug down. "It's pretty early, mate. Wilbur won't be up for a bit."

Do you care? Tommy almost asks. Instead, he swallows down another shot of poison.

"I'm walking."

Phil stands. Oh, Tommy's really done it now. He's concerned.

Well, it's too late for that. Phil should've picked a different time to be concerned – any of the million other times Tommy wanted him to be. Because now Phil's concern doesn't feel like the ambrosia it's supposed to. Now it just makes him want to shrivel up even more.

"There's supposed to be a storm today," Phil says, hooking his chin towards the window. "Maybe you should wait for Wil to wake up and take you."

Like usual, the unspoken words hang off the end of that sentence. But Phil had chucked usual at the window, hadn't he? He can't choose to have it back when it's convenient.

(He probably wouldn't anyway, Tommy's mind whispers. It feels like decay. Not if choosing usual means choosing me.)

Tommy humors Phil. He turns towards the window.

The miserable, cloud-swollen grey of the sky doesn't worry him like he thinks Phil wants it to. If anything, it empowers him. Good. Let the sky be as miserable as he feels.

Phil walks forward. Tommy stays still as prey up until the point Phil reaches his hand out, the way he does when he wants to ruffle his hair or rub his shoulder or pull him into a crushing embrace.

Tommy steps back. Phil freezes.

Tommy has to hang his head. The hesitant curl of Phil's hand, suspended infinitely between them, makes him even more sick. Electricity captures every molecule of air in the room. Tommy balls his fists up, feebly attempting to lessen the pressure currently compressing his ribcage.

Phil breaks first. "Tom," he starts carefully, *too* carefully, carefully in a way that's abrasive, "Are you—"

Wilbur stumbles into the kitchen.

He's still in his pajamas (they don't usually leave for another hour), a yawn clawing out of his unhinging jaw. When he steps past the doorway, it's like watching someone run into an electric fence. His arms fall down to his sides. The tension latches onto him too.

The moment breaks.

Tommy retracts every ounce of vulnerability that had threatened to shake through him. That icy blossom of anger is back. He straightens his shoulders, heart rearing at the sight of Phil's attempted delicateness.

Tommy jerks himself backward, interrupting their little standoff while he has the chance. He doesn't want Phil to ask him if he's okay, anyway. Then Tommy would have to lie or risk falling apart right there.

And he— he *won't*.

“I’ll see you later,” he mumbles, shouldering his backpack.

He backs towards the door. Wilbur’s gaze whips over to him. He takes a few sleepy steps forward, his tiredness pronouncing his confusion.

“You leaving?” The same thing Phil had asked. When Tommy nods, barely looking at him, that confusion is traded for franticness. His hands shoot towards his pockets, but there aren’t any keys to be found. “Wait, I’m not—”

“I’m walking,” Tommy spits.

Wilbur jerks back. His mouth snaps shut. Tommy doesn’t stay long enough to see how else he reacts to the hostility. He doesn’t care. It’s not like Wilbur likes him anyway. He can’t kill a reputation that’s been rotting six feet under for weeks.

“Tom, wait,” Phil says, fingers curling around Tommy’s arm. Tommy barely catches himself from ripping away. Instead, he forces himself to still, head turning just enough for his eyes to land vacantly on Phil’s shoulder. “Kiddo. What’s going on?”

For his credit, Phil lowers his voice.

He makes himself soft. Tantalizingly, temptingly, tenderly soft.

But that doesn’t take away from the fact that there are two sets of eyes boring into him. That doesn’t take away from the fact that he’d missed the only tradition they had anymore. That doesn’t take away from the fact that nothing is the same.

Like an ember popping off a campfire, something hot and messy slips through Tommy’s composure.

“Nothing you’d care about.”

Phil flinches.

Flinches. The flinch loosens his grip, hand pulling back in shock. The sloppy chorus of emotion that had been building inside of him fucking *crescendos*. It drowns everything else out. Tommy suddenly cannot breathe in this kitchen. He has to get away.

And Phil lets him. Or at least, Phil’s shock does.

Tommy makes a stilted, graceless exit. His head pounds all the way to the front door. Phil tries to call him back but by then, he’s outside.

The front door seals the gap between them like a coffin lid closing over. Tommy gasps for breath on the front porch, vision blurring. It takes too long for him to come down, and longer to unstick his shoes from the porch.

Maybe it’s his subconscious telling him to wait. It’s some childish, twisting plea.

Chase me. Call my bluff.

(I'm not okay. I haven't been okay. Please show me how to be okay again.)

Nobody comes. It's just him and the mocking storm clouds, the weeping sky and the heavy realization that he can't come up with any more reasons to hesitate. Tommy steps off the porch. He's numb even before the icy drizzle starts to soak into his jacket.

It's a bitter sort of comfort, he thinks, that at least something is as miserable as him.

—

"I'm driving you home."

Wilbur doesn't even give him the chance to escape him after school. He finds him the minute the bell rings, as Tommy is shovelling textbooks into his backpack. When Tommy slams the locker door shut—

There's Wilbur, keys in hand. Chin sharp, eyes just so. Techno's beside him because of course he is. They're like twin soldiers. Wherever one goes, the other is sure to follow, uncaring of the trouble that is sure to muddy their boots.

Tommy considers the merits of protesting until he sees the determined glint in his eyes. And then Techno, arms crossed right next to him. The fight dies out of him.

It would take more work to fight than it would be just to play along. The quicker they get home, the quicker Tommy can go back to avoiding them.

(And Phil. And his emotions. And the calendar. And everything.)

Still. "Did Phil tell you to do that?"

Wilbur's brow furrows. A crack races through his stubbornness, momentarily breaking it.

"What? No."

He seems genuinely surprised by Tommy's question.

Oh. "Fine."

He walks past him. Wilbur barely moves out of the way in time. Tommy doesn't know why he's grateful he didn't shoulder-check him. He should be too mad for that.

He leads the way to the car. All the while, the twins drift behind him. He can hear them whispering to each other, and it kills him. Any guilt he'd accumulated from Wilbur's insistence to make sure he walks is quick to fossilize. He pulls his jacket tighter around him.

Go ahead, he thinks, nose stinging. Keep cutting me out. I don't care.

He knows he's sulking when he throws his backpack into the backseat and tumbles in afterward. He knows he's sulking when he jams his earbuds in his ear and blasts music until they ring.

He knows he's sulking when Wilbur and Techno keep shooting him *looks* the whole drive back.

He knows he's sulking when he notices all of this and doesn't care.

The car ride lasts forever. Wilbur takes every corner slowly, lingering at stop signs with more of those pointed glances, like he's waiting for something. A reaction, maybe? Tommy does feel awfully like some sort of bomb right now. A mess of wire and gunpowder whose fuse was cut short an eternity ago. A warm wind could probably set him off.

Tommy starts meeting his eyes in the rearview with a challenging glare until he stops. By then, they're pretty much home.

Wilbur eases into the driveway – *eases*, doesn't screech in like usual – and cuts the engine. And then he sits there, hands still clutching the steering wheel. Tommy pauses for a moment. He watches him.

Wilbur takes a deep breath, but doesn't go to open the door. Tommy recognizes that for what it is – some misplaced attempt to talk, probably. He doesn't know why that strikes up panic in his chest.

He goes for the door, shoving it open without grace. Wilbur curses as Tommy tumbles out, fumbling for his own door to follow.

Tommy doesn't even look back at him.

The footsteps slapping off the driveway change in an instant, from hasty and frantic to slow and angry. Tommy pretends he's not behind him at all.

Wilbur scoffs, spinning his keys in his hand as he stomps after Tommy up the driveway.

"So, you lied to Techno," he calls. Tommy's shoulders curl. "You are mad at me."

Tommy shoves the front door open, throwing his backpack on the floor, not even the hook. "I'm not," he grits out. "And that was ages ago. Why would I be mad?"

"I'm asking you," Wilbur counters smoothly.

Tommy's jaw ticks. He heads to the kitchen right away, though he doesn't have a purpose. Distance, creating distance – that's a purpose. The further away from Wilbur he gets (and he's sure Techno's caught up to him by now) the less chance of a stray spark setting him off.

Unfortunately, Wilbur doesn't share the sentiment. He follows him.

Tommy turns around. He has nowhere else to go anyway.

"Nothing's wrong."

The edges of his vision blur. His heart ticks up, and he knows it's because he's lying. Wilbur knows too, because his face twists up.

“Sure. And you’re slamming my car door and sulking for no reason.”

Tommy’s cheeks redden. “I’m not fucking sulking.” He is. But what the fuck does Wilbur care? “It’s— it’s none of your business.”

“We’re kinda living in the same place,” Wilbur drawls. “Your business is my business.”

“It’s not. It’s so not.”

Wilbur raises an eyebrow. That’s when Techno edges into the doorway, taking his typical place on Wilbur’s side. Something which sends a pang through Tommy on a normal day makes his insides boil today.

They’re both watching him like he’s some kind of loose canon. Some natural phenomenon, volcanic explosion. Something crazy. And Tommy’s a lot of things – annoying, angry, forgotten – but he’s not *crazy*. Even if right now, he feels like it.

“So what is it, then, Tommy?” Wilbur pushes. He crosses his arms. “Maybe you haven’t gotten it through your thick skull, but we’re trying to *help you*.”

Tommy’s head spins. *Thick skull*, is what he thinks of him?

“Help me?” Tommy spits. “You can’t help me with this.” He gasps for air. “Nobody can.”

And all you’ve done is make it worse.

Techno steps forward, hand out. Tommy flinches away from him like a cornered animal. Techno stills. He doesn’t step back, though. He looks like he’d get closer if Tommy let him.

“What’s goin’ on, Tommy?”

Tommy shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut. His skin is warm, too warm. Everything is tinted with red. He just wants to sink into the earth. Maybe rest for a few decades, like Rip Van Winkle.

He doesn’t realize he’s forgotten to breathe until his knees start to shake. He tips forward, but then there’s a hand on his shoulder. Strong and heavy. Techno latches onto him, eyes wide with panic. Tommy blinks up at him, lungs heaving, a twisting hatred for himself ripping through him.

“Woah, Tommy, easy.” He lowers Tommy to the floor, then kneels with him, that stupidly concerned wrinkle still etched between his brows. “Tell us what’s wrong.”

He doesn’t want to. He can’t. They won’t understand, he barely understands himself right now, and this is all too much. The wrong people are caring about him with the wrong magnitude. He *can’t*.

The words fall out of his mouth anyway. Broken and cold and quiet, just like him.

“He missed dinner.”

It sounds lame even to his own ears. Tommy's fourteen, not four. Three words shouldn't be enough to lace his heart with fault lines. But it's three words representing a million he can't say, doesn't have the words to, doesn't know how to sift through himself.

It's three words representing weeks of being buried alive, of hating himself for suffocating when the soil closed over his nose, because maybe he was dying but is it anyone's fault but his?

He hides a helpless keen behind a jagged breath. He can't hope to do the same with the rest of this messy confession.

"He never forgets. It's— it's supposed to be a tradition. Me and Phil on the last Thursday of the month. And he *forgot*."

Wilbur's brow furrows. "Dinner? Is that it?"

Is that it is that it is that is—

Tommy snaps his head up so fast Wilbur almost recoils. He feels, distinctly, like he's just been slapped. Maybe Wilbur sees that starved-dog ferocity somewhere in his eyes, because he tries to raise his hands up.

"Of course it's not," he snaps, hands shaking. He edges away from Techno, because Techno has Wilbur's hands, and Tommy is suddenly made of glass. "I wouldn't be— be *freaking out* because of one dinner."

Wilbur has the decency to at least look apologetic. "Tommy—"

"It's every day," he cuts Wilbur off, eyes burning. His mouth is moving faster. His breaths are coming shorter. "It's— it's like I'm not even here anymore."

And oh, God. It's really spilling out of him now. He can feel the ceiling on his heart coming down around him. But gravity's a bitch. He can't do anything else but keep going. His fingernails sink into his palms.

"It's like— ever since you guys showed up, nothing is the same." He feels the flinch Techno gives beside him. But it doesn't process. Not like it should. "You know, before that, things were good! We had our family dinners and I was never forgotten and things were—"

Different. The word is on his tongue, ready to slip off of it. But he never gets the chance to finish that sentence. Because Techno is ripping his comforting hand away from Tommy and Wilbur is moving away and the gravity of what Tommy just said bears down on him without restraint.

"Things were what?" Wilbur echoes, voice very flat. Tommy freezes. "...better?"

Time screeches to a halt — and then laughs at him.

"No," Tommy is quick to deny, reaching forward—

Wilbur moves himself out of the way, lifting himself bodily to his feet. He's oddly gray, pallor twisted and sickly. He stares down at Tommy like he's staring at something horrific. Tommy's stomach gives a violent lurch.

"That's what you just said," Wilbur points out coldly. "You said things were *good*."

Beside Tommy, Techno inches away. Tommy watches him go with a delayed sort of horror. All of his stupidity, this shapeless confession that had no business being uttered, compresses around him.

If Tommy thought it was hard to breathe before, it's worse now. Pain pinches his lungs.

"I meant different," he insists, throat closing up. "That's all I meant."

He knows, before he's finished speaking, that he fucked up. Horribly, possibly irreparably, he's crossed a line. Because Wilbur laughs.

It's cold, hollow, razor-sharp. Sardonic and rich with a thick sarcasm.

"Right," he laughs under his breath, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "Glad to know that we made your life so much fucking *worse*."

The room spins around him – a carousel ride that he can't get to *stop*.

"Wilbur, that's not what I'm saying. I–"

I love you guys. You make my life so much better. I just wish I could love you and have Phil. His mind claws up his mouth. All of it. All at once.

"I just– sometimes I think I want things to go back to how they *were*, and I know that's not– I can't have that, and I'm not saying I don't want you guys here, because I do, I just– I want Phil to treat me like a son again. I don't– I feel like I have to compete now, and that's not your fault but–"

Wilbur stares at him incredulously. The pure molten shock flays Tommy where he stands. His mouth snaps shut, torrent of word-vomit sealed off.

"Are you fucking serious? That's what this is about? You're crying because you don't get to be the center of attention?"

Tommy almost falls over. "No, *no*– that's not what I meant–"

"If you wanted me and Techno gone you could've just said something." Wilbur scoffs. He looks... heartbroken. It's so much worse than anger. "Fucking hell."

If you wanted me and Techno gone. Tommy is hit with so much dread that his heart kicks up an instant protest, nearly shattering his ribcage as it tries to punch through his chest. That would be like losing a limb. That would be like losing all his limbs and his organs and the world.

For a moment, he can't catch his breath.

So Tommy whips his head around to Techno desperately.

He doesn't know why he expects to find mercy there – maybe because Techno had always been the peace to Wilbur's storm. Even when they'd first arrived, where Wilbur was jagged all over and reactive, Techno was too-cold. Defensive. But he was receptive to being talked to. He listened.

He doesn't think Techno is listening now. When Tommy turns to Techno, all he gets is cold, carved ice.

Techno shakes his head. He looks hurt, too. He's hurt and swallowing it. Tommy flinches back.

"I don't want you gone," Tommy pleads, forcing himself onto shaky feet. "I just– *I want my dad!*"

"You have him!"

It comes out so loud that Tommy flinches away from Wilbur. But Wilbur doesn't. His disbelief triples, lighting Tommy's skin on fire.

"Don't you see that, Tommy?" Wilbur yells in his face. Tommy can't bring himself to move away. Not even as Wilbur's chest heaves, hands flying out as he gestures like it's killing him to speak these words. "He's right there! You have him *all the fucking time!*"

Tommy's vision blurs. "You don't get it," he whispers, clenching his fists. "You don't–"

"Of course I don't!" Wilbur shouts, face red. Not with anger, necessarily, but pain. "Don't you remember, Tommy?" He stumbles over to Techno, and Techno slides an arm around his chest in silent support. "We don't have parents! We don't have someone to hold our hand when we're sad or pack our fucking lunches or to have family dinners with–"

"Neither do I!"

The canyon that has been sawing through him widens.

Not anymore, sings his poisoned mind. *Not really.*

Wilbur's expression shakes. Tommy balls his hands into fists, tilting his chin up. *Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me he hasn't let me fade out into nothing.*

"Oh, bullshit," Wilbur breathes, glaring venom. "You're fucking blind if you don't see how much Phil adores you."

Tommy stills, surprise flooding through him. It's squashed instantly by a bone-deep denial. *He's lying.* Wilbur doesn't say it like a good thing. He says it like a barb.

“And you know, Tommy,” Wilbur continues, nodding half-vacantly. “If you really can’t stand us *interrupting* your *perfect fucking life*—”

“I never—”

“Well, guess what!” Wilbur’s eyes blaze with tears. “You’ll have him for the rest of your fucking life. But us?” Tommy’s heart drops. “We’ll be gone in a year and a half! We’re not here forever, remember? Not even fucking close.”

That... tears something vicious through Tommy. He stumbles forward. The ground does its best to evade each fumbling footfall.

“Wil, Techno, please—”

But when Wilbur backs away, Techno follows. Still holding him, guiding him back in a silent vigil.

“So just wait, Tommy. In a year, you can forget all about us. You can have your perfect family.” Wilbur’s voice drops, low low low. Tommy can barely hear it over the ringing of his ears. “...to think I thought you wanted us to be a part of it.” He wets his lips, head slanting down to whisper, “*Stupid.*”

That’s where Wilbur breaks. That’s where Techno steps in to pick up the pieces.

(Tommy stands, shaking and frozen, in the eye of a hurricane of his own creation, rubble haloing him.)

“Come on, Wil,” Techno gruffs, squeezing his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

It takes Wilbur a good few seconds to nod. He snuffles, swiping a hand over his face. Tommy catches a glimpse of hot tears spilling silver down his cheeks. Bile climbs up his throat.

That bile threatens to erupt out of him when Techno snatches Wilbur’s car keys off the counter.

They’re leaving, he realizes, shell-shocked and far too late. *They’re leaving.*

“Wait,” Tommy whispers; it’s barely a sound. He clears his throat, tries again, “Wait—”

Techno looks back at him. It’s all harsh, frigid anger and stony resolution. Any pity from before, as Techno had tried to comfort him, is dead, buried, and grieved. It’s the last glimpse he gets, and it petrifies him like a Gorgon.

Then the twins are gone, staggering out the door, screen slamming against the hinges.

The sound of the engine roaring faintly to life reanimates Tommy’s wooden limbs.

He lurches toward the window, a prayer clogging his throat, regret making him dizzy, heart fucking pounding—

Just in time to watch the car vanish out of the driveway, taking Tommy's heart with it.

He doesn't know how long he stays like this – suspended between regret and shock and a million apologies he cannot hope to utter. There is nobody here to receive them. Tommy collapses on the kitchen tile, sat up against the sink, tears long-dried on his cheeks.

He tries his best to reach them, moving numb fingers across his phone screen as time stretches on, and on, and on.

Twenty minutes after the end of the world, 4 p.m:

To Wilbur, *I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Please come home.*

4:30 p.m.

To Techno, *You're part of the family. I should've said that. I never wanted you guys gone. Please come home.*

5 p.m.

To Wilbur, *Please don't be gone. I'm sorry. I don't care if you yell at me. Just come home.*

To Techno, *I don't know what I'd do without you.*

5:45.

To Wilbur, *I didn't know I could be a brother till I met you. I loved it. I swear I did. I still do. I'm sorry. Please come home.*

To Techno, *I was wrong. You made my life so much better. I just couldn't see it until you were gone. Give me a chance to apologize. I promise I will.*

6.

To Wilbur, *I love you. You're my brother. I know I'm the biggest idiot alive. Please tell me to my face. I love you.*

To Techno, *I love you. You're my brother. I fucked up so bad. I'm so sorry. I never wanted you gone. I love you.*

The messages are unseen. They stay that way.

It's when the sky begins to bleed purple and blue that he gives up. Not because he wants to. Regret keeps him painfully wanting, every nerve in his body electrified. But because it's

getting dark and there's still a big, wide gaping hole between his lungs where the twins *aren't* and Phil will be home soon and he's scared.

Tommy is scared.

He's scared that he lost the family he never appreciated and he's scared because it's his fault.

Tommy grips the edge of the counter, hosting himself up. His legs are sore from disuse. He forces them into function, sliding his phone in his pocket.

He doesn't know when the plan had formed. Probably sometime between pushing away the only light in the house and then realizing his idiocy. But it pumps through him, hot with his blood.

He needs to find them.

Wilbur and Techno left, sure, but maybe they didn't go far. Maybe he still has a chance to salvage this.

Please let me have a chance to salvage this.

Tommy inhales deeply, releases it. If he can find them before Phil gets back from work, things might not be so irreparably damaged. Tommy can clean up his mess.

It's barely a plan. Barely more than an emotion-propelled shred of a decision.

But it's something. Without it, Tommy has nothing.

He checks his phone one last time as he's heading out the door. The text message notification nearly stops his heart. It stops his body, stops him right there on the front porch stoop. Cold winter wind slices over him, instantly cutting through his thin jacket.

Tommy barely feels it as he fumbles to unlock his phone and— oh.

It's Phil. Just Phil.

Hey, kiddo. Can we talk tonight?

Tommy bites his lip until copper tinges his tongue. His heart thuds dully. Cotton consumes him. He's tempted to stay here, wait a few moments. See what Phil means, what he wants to talk about.

Did he remember? Or is this about the twins?

Whatever. He shoves down the flood of what he would usually let devour him: anger, jealousy, bitterness. All that had done is fuck him over even worse. All that had done is direct his blame onto the wrong people. Onto the most guiltless, undeserving people of all.

Tommy knows, now, that he'd never been mad at the twins.

Tommy had just been afraid.

Of losing Phil, like he lost his mom, like he loses most good things. He'd been afraid of not being good enough. He'd been afraid to make himself vulnerable to love. And he'd fulfilled his own twisted prophecy.

He stops stalling.

I'm with Wil and Tech right now, he types back carefully. We're hanging out. I'll see you later?

He powers off his phone before he can get the response. He thinks if he sees the delight he know Phil'll have, he'll keel over right there. And then he won't be finding anything.

The sky that greets him when he steps onto the driveway is almost black. The sun sets early in the winter. Tommy's suns had vanished. The next burst of chilly wind that rushes over him is damp and annoyed.

There's a storm coming, Tommy remembers. It'll be at its peak in the next few hours.

If things go right, he can bring Techno and Wilbur back before then.

I'm sorry, he rehearses, squaring his chin. I'll fix this.

Determination stinging his tongue, Tommy charges into the night.

—

He feels a lot less heroic once he makes it out of his neighborhood.

Tommy walks for ages, checking out all the obvious spots first. The park down the block that the twins sometimes go to, the cafe just outside the borough, the music store down the street from there, even the school, just in case they're borrowing the empty parking lot.

He comes up dry each time. It makes him want to wither up and flake away.

But he can't. Even as his options shrink down to the size of his heart, he can't give up. The twins deserve to have him looking for them. They could be miles away, but at least he tried. That has to matter.

The storm picks up, and picks up, and picks up.

It's like it's trying to match his mounting panic. Within an hour, his sweatshirt is soaked through. Wet fabric clings to his shivering skin. His hair gets plastered to his numb face. A heavy swath of dark grey clouds cover up any light that would've otherwise offered him the frailest guidance as he ends up wandering another park. Even the streetlights are dressed in their funeral blacks.

He should give up.

Either Wilbur and Techno don't want to be found, or they're so far out that Tommy won't find them at all. They have a car; he doesn't. It's perfect logic. If he goes home now, he might make it back by midnight. Curfew is long-shattered, but he can lick his wounds in his bedroom. He should go. But is it really *home* if they're not there?

Tommy keeps searching.

—

The news hadn't explained just how awful it feels to be a walking icicle.

Rain comes down in silvery sheets. He can barely see straight in front of him. He's miserable. This was stupid. A noble expenditure sure, but a fruitless one. Each step he makes down the random sidewalk he's crusading becomes leaden and clumsy before long.

Tommy is half-convinced that he could walk past Wilbur and Techno and not see them in his haze. It's so dark that he can't see his own hand when he raises it in front of his face. The streetlights are blurry – desperation took him to parts of his own town that even he doesn't recognize.

He's not just guilty, now. He's afraid.

They're more miserable. If they're out here, they're hurting.

Tommy keeps searching.

—

He distracts himself from the cold with more apologies.

They grow sloppier with each shapeless rehearsal. He trips over sentences he can't even speak aloud over his frozen tongue, mashes syllables that don't make it out of his head.

Eventually, it all breaks down to this:

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Tommy keeps searching.

—

It takes too long for him to realize that the wetness on his cheeks isn't from the torrenting rain.

Oh, he thinks, when the sob finally breaks out of him. He comes to a dead stop on the street. He's too tired to do anything but hang his head. *I'm crying.*

He didn't mean to cry, but the tears ravage him. Salt mixes with rain mixes with a child devastation mixes with *I'm still sorry.*

“Shit,” he whispers, nails digging into his unfeeling palms. “Shit.”

He takes one step forward and trips into a puddle. Down he goes, knees striking icy water. He can’t get much colder. Tommy only really feels the pressure of the water and the sting of the concrete. He cries harder.

He half-crawls out of the puddle, dragging himself under the shadowed cover of a bus stop bench. It offers the barest protection from the cold because the tiny construction blocks the rain. It’s not the greatest shelter, but it works. All he needs is to open his phone.

...why does that feel so hard?

Tommy takes a deep shuddering breath. Now that he’s out of the rain, he’s colder than ever. And now he’s stalling again.

Tommy powers his phone on.

It takes a century and a half to open up. He watches the screen come to life through glazed eyes.

The first thing to slam into him is the time. It’s later than he thought. Almost 2 a.m.

Tommy has been looking for hours. It can’t actually have been that long, can it? It doesn’t feel like it has. Then again, the cold makes it hard to tell.

The second thing to rattle him is the onslaught of text messages and missed phone calls. And not all of them are from Phil. Not even half of them.

Tommy’s hand shakes as he swipes through his phone. He starts with the ones he’s half-convinced aren’t real.

From Techno: *We’re home but you’re not. Mind telling Phil you’re not in a ditch somewhere?*

Phil’s worried sick.

Okay, you got me. I’m worried sick. Wilbur won’t admit it, but he is too.

First text message he sees from Wilbur: *I came home. Now it’s your turn.*

Don’t be an idiot, Tommy

I thought you said I could yell at you. Where are you?

So they made it home. That’s good. That’s what he wanted. That warms him for a moment before ice swallows him back down.

Phil: *You lied, Tommy. Where are you?*

I love you. I just want you safe. I won’t be mad.

I’m sorry about the dinner. Techno and Wilbur told me everything they knew.

Tommy's breath hitches. His fingers spasm around the phone.

He skips down. It's too painful to read that. And he has so much more to read, and barely any energy to do it.

The most recent message reads:

I'm calling the police in ten minutes. Don't make me. Just let me hug you.

Tommy's heart *jumps*. His eyes shoot over to the timestamp: *eight minutes ago*. Panic giving life to his stiff, blue-tipped fingers, Tommy acts.

He doesn't read what else his dad says. He sends his location. And, feeling awfully like a dumb, failure of a kid, Tommy tucks his knees up to his chest, and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

—

He knows the minute he sees the car that Phil broke at least a dozen traffic laws to get to him.

But before that, Tommy is drifting, half-asleep on the bus stop bench. There's a prickly fuzz wrapped around everything. Not even the cold is so cold anymore. He set his phone down on his thigh. It exploded with buzzing and ringing the minute Tommy answered the messages. He lost the energy to reach down and grab it again.

Instead, he waited for—

There. Headlights, streaking across the road. Rain carries the pokey scent of scorched rubber over to him as Phil's Subaru veers around the corner.

Tommy blinks, raising his head tiredly. He curls his shoulders in.

Phil drives like he's trying to escape a bomb. The car throws brilliant light up Tommy's face. He recoils, throwing a hand up.

Deer in headlights, he thinks, and he's so delirious with exhaustion that it almost makes him crack a smile.

The minute the headlights land on him – rain splitting the beams in a million different directions – Phil slams on the breaks. Tommy winces as the car grinds to an abrupt halt, ending up “parked” sideways in the middle of the road. Hazard lights flash blurrily in his vision.

Tommy unfolds his limp limbs and tries to stand.

His father is faster. The car is barely still before Phil is throwing the door open, and himself out with it.

“Tommy?” he calls, tearing through the distance between them. “Tommy, oh my God—”

Tommy slams into Phil’s arms. They collide like two asteroids streaking at each other. Phil is quick to squeeze him tight, whispering a litany of prayers Tommy can barely hear.

“Where *were you?*” he whispers, but not in an angry way, in a terrified way (just like Tommy). He presses a million kisses into the crown of Tommy’s head as he rocks them back and forth. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Tommy breaks into tears. It’s embarrassing – he’s never cried more in his life than he has tonight. But that doesn’t mean he can get himself to stop. He just cries and cries, his mind crumpling in on itself.

His tears break something in Phil. His father holds the back of his head, guiding Tommy to cry into his chest like he’d done when he was a baby. God, Tommy missed this.

“I’m sorry,” Phil whispers, stroking his hair in the pouring rain. His father is unbothered by it, though. “I’m so sorry, kiddo. I... I messed up.”

“It’s okay,” Tommy whispers, clutching Phil’s jacket. He feels Phil tense up, probably in denial, and Tommy snuffles. “It’s— I don’t want to do this right now.”

He feels, distinctly, like he’s been put through a meat grinder, chewed up, and spit back out. All pulled apart and ropey and emotional and shit.

Phil hesitates, pulling back. He mulls over Tommy’s words, and it looks like it hurts him to do so. But something on Tommy’s face must lend him the grace to do so – maybe the way he’s shivering so violently – because he dips his head.

“Tomorrow,” Phil decides hesitantly. “First thing tomorrow.”

Tommy nods. If he can just get to tomorrow, can sleep away tonight and all the bad parts with it, he’ll be grateful. Phil cups his cheeks, relishing the pulse of life on his skin. And then he frowns.

“You’re freezing,” he hisses, thumb smoothing over Tommy’s wet cheekbones. “Jesus, kid—”

“It’s okay. I don’t feel it.”

Pain lashes across his face. “That’s not *any better*—”

“Dad,” Tommy says, wiping at his eyes. He steps away from the anxious wringing of Phil’s hands. “I love you.”

Phil stills. His lips part, eyelashes blinking quickly. Then, Tommy swears he sees them swell with tears, “I love you, too, kiddo.” He hefts out a strained laugh, brushing at his now-soaked hair. “God, we have a lot to talk about.”

“I know.”

For once, that doesn't scare him.

Because first...

Tommy eases himself out of Phil's arms. He ignores the weeping cry of his heart, begging him to sink into it. Phil is safe. Despite everything, he's safe.

But when he pulls away from Phil's hug, lifting his red, puffy eyes off up, he sees them. Techno and Wilbur. Standing there, by the car, silhouettes haloed by the glare of the headlights.

They're both in pajamas – pajamas which are quickly being pelted by the same rain that has turned Tommy into a walking icicle. Neither of them seem to notice. In fact... *Tommy* is the only thing that's captured their attention. They watch him warily, just as frozen as him.

His throat tightens.

Despite the fact that he's been chasing them all night, his first instinct is to run.

He does his best to stomp that down. There's no running to be done, not anymore. No matter what the result is. He's sure whatever he gets will be exactly what he earned.

Tommy takes a half-step forward.

Wilbur's breath hitches, Tommy can see the slight movement of his lips. He freezes, terrified. They're locked in a standstill before he knows it: magnets in each of their chests. Tommy just doesn't know whether the magnets are pulling or pushing. Only that they're there, urging something.

Did he– should he stay back–

Techno makes the decision none of them make.

He grits his teeth, takes two steps forward, and pulls Tommy into his arms. The motion is too fast to be anything but frantic. Time snaps back into motion like a rubber band. And where Techno goes, Wilbur is sure to follow. Which means–

Another set of arms envelop him, just as desperate as the last. The noise in Tommy's head dies out.

"I want you here," he's whispering the minute he's close enough. "I'm sorry, I want you, stay, you're forever, please stay–"

Wilbur and Techno hug him like they've been giving hugs all their life. And oh, he remembers. They have. Perks of having a sibling.

"Shh," Wilbur murmurs, indistinctly to his left. "Shut up." Tommy does, going rigid. Wilbur's voice softens. "Let me hug you, idiot."

Oh. Maybe things aren't as broken as he thought.

“We thought you were dead or somethin’,” Techno gruffs. The shaking tips of his fingers dig into Tommy’s soaked jacket. Tommy leans into him. “Warn us before you disappear.”

Tommy blinks. “I was looking for you guys.”

Wilbur yanks away. For a moment, in the near-dark, Tommy gets a glimpse of the confusion furrowing his features. The shock. And then he’s hugging him all over again.

“Dumbass,” he says. “Something could’ve happened.”

Something could’ve happened. The words marinate in his mind, curdling up.

Something could’ve happened like that’s... something Wilbur would care about?

“I don’t get it,” he has to admit, tilting his head up. Regretfully, it loosens the twins’ grip on him. But he has to understand. “I messed up. I’m an idiot.”

I yelled at you. Made you think I was happier with you gone. Drove you away because I was misery wanting company.

And you’re here hugging me, finishes the words he doesn’t get a chance to say. *Comforting me. Caring for me?*

Wilbur cracks a tired smile, jagged around the edges, pinched where it approaches his eyes. His hands brace on Tommy’s shoulders, never quite leaving. “Yeah, you are.”

Tommy chokes out a startled sound. Maybe a laugh, maybe a whine. Techno gently bumps his shoulder, brow wrinkled up.

“Haven’t you heard? Brothers fight.” His lips tilt up a whisper, lame but earnest. “It’s just the way it works.”

Tommy stills.

Brother, sings his mind, and it’s a joyous, celestial chorus. *Brother, he called me brother, we’re brothers.*

He almost starts crying *again*. “O-oh.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur breathes, sniffing. There’s a flush on his cheeks, relief and fear combined. He swallows. “Can we... go home?”

Tommy nods, still trying to catch his breath. (*Brother brother brother.*)

“Home,” he agrees quietly. His very bones shiver, then light up with warmth. “Yeah, that’s—we can. Be mad again later, yeah?”

Techno nods, sliding his arm behind Tommy’s shoulder this time, guiding. “Glad you said that,” he says. “Because you look like a drowned rat.”

Tommy coughs, a laugh tangling out of him. “*What?*”

“He’s right,” Wilbur chimes in. There’s a faint beam of light in his voice. “You do look, remarkably, like a drowned rodent.”

“Fuck– fuck you,” Tommy sputters, even as he shuffles closer to them. He feels like a drowned rat. Not that he admits that to these horrible, awful pricks. “I look great.”

“Mhm,” Techno mumbles. “Is that why you’re clinging to me?”

Tommy instantly jumps away. Techno frowns, arm snapping him right back.

“Hey, that doesn’t mean you have to *leave*. I was just observin’.”

Oh. Tommy settles against him.

“Can we *observe* the car heater?” Wilbur wonders aloud, snatching Tommy’s sleeve. “It’s pissin’ it down.”

“Amen,” Tommy murmurs. “Ay-fuckin’-men.”

And he lets them pile him into the car – squished neatly between Techno and Wilbur.

As the door slams shut on each side of him, sealing off the storm once and for all, he looks up to watch Phil drift after them, taking his place in the driver’s seat. There’s a fond smile etched on his face. It’s not perfectly whole, but not horribly severed.

It’s fondness like he’s staring at an old picture, like he’s thinking of dead memories. It’s fondness like, *There is so much more love to be had here*.

The car takes them towards home.

Brothers fight, echoes in Tommy’s mind. Tommy lays his head on Techno’s shoulder. Techno lets him.

And that’s the beauty of it, isn’t it? That’s the missing part of siblinghood he’s never had, the void between his lungs never-quite-filled. Brothers fight. They get to crack, and fight, and break, and then do it all over again.

Tommy, even soaking wet and bone cold and reeling from the fight that he knows still needs mending, doesn’t think he could ever trade it. Not for the world, and not to save the world.

If this is brotherhood, he’ll take it: in all its rotten, loving, immovable glory.

He closes his eyes and drifts off.

—

The talks come, as they always do. But not until Tommy has showered in scalding water, tossed his sopping clothes in the hamper, and then slept in for ten hours.

His mind makes it a bigger deal than it is.

When Tommy stumbles downstairs on Saturday morning, he half-expects there to be some charade already set up. Some *we've been expecting you* bullshit, turning chairs and deep frowns and a platter for him to set his heart on to be dissected.

But that's not what happens.

It starts with Techno, and a question Tommy can't keep off his brain as they finish breakfast in a strange peace and split off to... do whatever. He doesn't know.

He hovers in the doorway of Techno's room until Techno stops pretending not to see him and calls him in.

"Whaddya want?"

Tommy settles down on the end of Techno's bed, careful not to disturb the pressed line of his blankets. "I just... wanted to say sorry, again."

Techno looks up, closing his book. "Tommy—"

"*I know*, we already sort of got over it, but—" Techno must sense his anxiety in the breathless rush of the words, because he doesn't cut Tommy off again. Good. That's good. It makes his next breaths come way easier. "But I need you to know. I shouldn't have been that upset over Phil."

There. It's out. His heart cringes, denying what it's spent weeks weeping over, but Tommy ignores it. He cauterizes the denial with this: *regardless of how I felt, it was never their fault.*

Techno frowns at him. "Tommy, you and Wilbur both said... a lot durin' the heat of the moment. But we talked. We understand where you comin' from."

Do you? Tommy almost squeaks. *Because I still only have half an idea.*

Techno signs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "It's... I think Wilbur and I both got used to being sent away. It didn't matter how serious the fight should've been. It always ended up *just serious enough* to send us packin'."

Tommy's mouth dries. "Techno..."

Techno shakes his head. "Obviously, that wasn't the case here. And we didn't get it right away." He laughs, a little strained. "Once we got home and saw that you were *perusing the streets* for us, it was pretty clear that that wasn't the case. That the fight was worse than it needed to be."

"It was," Tommy rasps. "It really was."

Techno finally looks at him again, stormy expression clearing. "Point is, stop apologizin' to me. I'm sorry. Wilbur's sorry. You're sorry." That half-smile is back, wry and dry. "It's like Wil said. Brothers fight." He nods his head slowly. "Then they make up."

“Not you and Wilbur,” Tommy points out.

He doesn’t know why he says it. It just sort of comes out.

Techno scoffs. “Please,” he drawls. “I’ve never fought harder with anyone than I have Wilbur.”

Oh. “Really?”

Techno’s eyes twinkle. “Yes, *really*.” He sits up, facing Tommy dead-on. “Now say it.”

Tommy blinks, shifting back. “...say what?”

“What you really came here to say.”

For a moment, all Tommy can do is stare at him. Techno’s face softens.

“Look, Tommy, if you really came to me to apologize again, you can console yourself knowin’ I know. But I don’t think that’s it.”

Tommy’s chest squeezes. He digs his fingers into the blankets beneath him. “You’re right,” he says. “That wasn’t it.”

Techno waits, watching him but endlessly patient. Always the best listener, an endless basin. That’s the only reason Tommy’s able to open his mouth at all.

And once he does, it’s like all the other times. No filter, no more walls, just— words.

“I came to make sure you guys weren’t leaving.”

Techno falters. For a split second, Tommy knows all the terror in the world.

“Ah,” Techno says. Tommy, stiff as board, doesn’t dare move. Techno wets his lips. He looks nervous, too, now. “Well, we’re not.”

Tommy breathes. If Techno wasn’t watching him so carefully, he’d keel over right there.

“I think we’re too attached,” he adds, and Tommy can’t tell if that’s a blessing or a curse with the way he says it. Techno casts a Look at him. “Now get out of my room.”

Moment broken. Tommy falls off the bed.

He picks himself up like a puppet. It’s pure relief and happiness acting as the string for his puppet-limbs. They’re staying. That’s all he needed to hear.

“Love you, Technoblade,” he throws at him. “See you later, Technoblade.”

Techno says it back like this: “Out of my room.”

And also this, as Tommy stumbles out of the room with a blinding grin—

“And Tommy—”

(He stills, hanging on to each word, to each sliver of the smile Techno offers him.)

“For what it’s worth, you’re better at being a little brother than you give yourself credit.” The smile grows into a rare, full-on one. “Lord knows you’re annoyin’ enough.”

“Oy—!”

The banter that breaks out after that is heatless and *fun*. Positively delightful, even.

But it’s such a brother-thing to do, right? He’s starting to learn that. Tommy thinks he can forgive Techno just this once.

—

With Wilbur, their discussion comes out of nowhere. One minute, they’re on Wilbur’s bed, watching some fish documentary Wilbur is fixated on, and Tommy’s spitting up another round of apologies—

(Yes, he knows what Techno said about apologies. Yes, Wilbur already called it “water under the bridge, Tommy, I promise. I’m staying.”

Yes, he still closes his eyes and thinks of that heartbroken look on Wilbur’s face when he thought Tommy wanted him gone.)

—and the next, Wilbur is turning to him, too casually—

“I told Phil to give you the talk.”

Tommy casts him a horrified look. “I already know all the shit and piss about the birds and the bees—”

“What? No, that’s not what I meant.” Wilbur’s face goes red. He punches Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy immediately doubles over. “Also, you’re weird. Why the fuck would you say it like that?”

Tommy grins. He bounces back upright. “Dunno. ‘S fun?”

Wilbur sighs. “You’re a gremlin.”

“You love me.”

“Yeah,” he heaves a deeper sigh. “I guess I do.”

That should not make Tommy as happy as it does. He tries to keep the radiance off his face, but he thinks Wilbur can tell, because his eyes shine.

Anyway. (Tommy settles against him. It’s a new thing, being so touchy. If he had known Wilbur was this open to touch the whole time, he never would’ve left his side.)

“I told Phil to remind you that he loves you.”

The air in the room goes cold. Tommy stares at him

(His heart starts to beat, and beat, and beat.)

“I know he does.”

“No.” His gaze burns into him, suddenly intense. Tommy can’t escape him. “I told him to remind you that he loves you.”

“I... know.”

“Tommy.” Wilbur frowns at him, eyes sad. “Phil loves you. You’ll always be his son.”

Why are you repeating this? Tommy almost spits, but he can’t get the words out. Not right away. Wilbur’s words make him sweaty and clammy.

“I know he does,” he whispers.

It feels like a lie. And the look on Wilbur’s face feels like getting caught.

His foster brother shakes his head. “You don’t. I don’t think yesterday would’ve happened if you remembered.” He lets out a heavy breath. It’s almost enough to knock Tommy over with how stiff he is right now. “But that’s okay. It’s easy to forget.”

How does he know? Tommy wonders. How has yesterday turned to this: from harsh words spat carelessly and wrongly to Wilbur reaching into his chest and translating his heart himself. Wilbur must feel Tommy just... slack-jawed, staring at him. But he doesn’t look. Keeps his eyes lasered on the fish floating across the TV.

“And I wasn’t lying, you know. When I said he adores you. You’re all he talks about,” Wilbur tells him. It’s too nonchalant. Syrupy and sweet and everything Tommy wanted to hear and enough to make him shiver. “Tommy-this, and Tommy-that.” *Now*, he turns to him. And there’s no jealousy, or meanness. Not in his voice, not anywhere on his face. Only pride. Love. “You’re his world.”

Tommy’s breath shakes. His lungs wobble.

“Wil...”

Wilbur flashes him a smile, quick as a meteor. Then— TV again.

“Don’t cry on me,” he sighs. “That would be embarrassing.”

Tommy snuffles. He latches onto the pretend-anger instead of— whatever the fuck is racing through him right now. Every emotion ever, he thinks. As well as a good shot of ambrosia.

“I’m not gonna fuckin’ cry, dickhead.”

Wilbur glances at him. “Good.” He doesn’t sound like he believes it. He pauses the TV and lets his limbs go dramatically limp. With his head tilted up towards the ceiling– “Now go get me a glass of water.”

Tommy glares at him. (It’s not watery. It’s *not*.)

“Why the fuck would I do that.”

Wilbur cocks his head.

“...I’ll let you sit in my room while I practice guitar?”

Fuck.

Tommy goes and gets the water.

—

By the time he gets to Phil, things are paradoxically the simplest and the hardest.

The first thing Phil does is apologize in his dad, sappy, guilt-ravaged way.

Each word is a suture, stitching up every single gap inside him until the gaping mess of wounds he’d become is remarkably whole. It’s medicine.

“I love you, son. I think I forgot to show you that these last couple of months. I’ve been tired. But I’ve never stopped loving you. You’re– I’m so proud of you, kiddo. Did you know that? You’re my greatest creation. And the minute I remembered about dinner–”

Phil, kneeling in front of him like a sinner, chokes up there. Tommy has to shut that down quickly.

He’s already sworn to never cry ever again. He’s done enough crying in the last forty-eight hours than he ever wants to again.

And besides, hearing Phil apologize, that is where the paradox begins.

Because the very words he’s been chasing every day these last few months... aren’t what he wants. Not exactly.

Because his heart has something else to consider.

Because as much as it heals Tommy to hear the proof that his dad never forgot him at all – giving him sight where he hadn’t had it before, air where his lungs had failed to catch it, warmth where he’d resigned himself to being cold forever – Phil has already made up for it a million times over afterward.

With hugs, and hot cocoa they all shared before bed, and promises he swore his life on.

And there is something else, now, that Tommy needs to hear. Needs the way his body needs blood, the way he needs daily naps, the way he needs Techno and Wilbur and Phil.

In the end, the thing he needs to hear has nothing to do with him.

“Dad. We can’t let them go.”

Phil’s face shatters. “I won’t. We aren’t losing them.”

“Never,” Tommy says. “Even when they’re eighteen. We’re never losing them.”

“Forever, Tommy. They’re staying forever.” Phil’s eyes gleam. “As long as they’ll have us, we’ll be their family.”

Tommy nods. He can finally breathe again. It’s sweet. His head is spinning, lightheaded from worry. Something changes in the way when Phil makes this promise for him.

It feels, for once, like... peace.

Oh.

Hello there, peace. It’s nice to see you again.

And then Phil goes and undoes him.

“Tommy.” He looks to his father, chin already wobbling. For a moment, they’re identical: from their features, down to the jaggedness itself. And the love. “Your mother would be so proud.”

That ends up being the straw that breaks him.

This time, his father is there to catch all his pieces.

This time, Tommy knows he always will be.

The next family dinner comes a week late.

This time, Tommy couldn't be happier about it.

They set the table for four, with a candle at the fifth seat: Tommy-Incident forgotten.

"Things are changing," Phil smiles at him, as he sets it down where mom would've sat. The tiny orange flame blazes warmly, like long dark hair and soft eyes and a lively touch he'll never let himself forget. "Let's make sure it's for the better this time, yeah?" He gives him a stern look. "No leaning over the flames."

Tommy raises his hands in surrender. But he listens. He quite likes his hair *intact*.

They don't have lasagna for dinner, but they do have pasta, which is close enough. It's just different enough to erase the bad taste out of his mouth and plant a new one.

A new seed, he thinks. Like a new candle.

Gold blends everything together: the pasta-making, the sauce-blending, the knife-fighting, the consequential banning of the knife-fighting, making the table and fighting for the best seats.

Eventually, the three of them all settle down around the table while goes and grabs the pasta.

When he walks in, he sees this:

Techno, Tommy, and Wilbur sitting next to each other. Tommy snatches a slice of garlic bread off the table and eats it early.

"This is heavenly," he groans through a full mouth, grinning at Techno to make him uncomfortable.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Wilbur is quick to snap. Then, smiling brightly, "But thanks. I made it."

Tommy spits it out. "Oh. Then it's shit."

Techno laughs. Wilbur scowls, raising his fork. Tommy tilts his head challengingly, inching his hands towards his own set of very-sharp utensils—

And all three of them straighten in unison when Phil emerges into the room again. He's wearing large red oven mitts as he carries in the big metal pasta pot to dump into the big bowl in the middle of the table. Steam wafts up from the top; it's nothing compared to the pleased domestic flush dusting Phil's smiling cheeks.

The one that grows positively jovial when he sees them getting along.

"My boys," he announces fondly.

“Quick,” Techno whispers. It’s just loud enough for Phil to hear. “Everyone start fighting. Tommy, start fake-crying.”

Tommy instantly makes his eyes well up. Phil laughs and steps over to the table.

“Little shits.”

He gets the pasta ready to serve. Techno, fiddling with his butter knife, grins dryly.

“Don’t know what you mean, Phil.”

In unison, Tommy and Wilbur both raise a piece of bread to their mouths and chew it. The picture of innocence. Phil’s doubt warms them up like pure fire.

“Oh, fuck off,” he grumbles, and Tommy bursts into laughter. Phil shakes his head. It’s all love. “Now dig in. Happy family dinner night.”

They do. And it’s warm. And they’re whole. And the candle glows dimly in the corner, making everything feel that much better.

Tommy smiles the whole time, even when Wilbur throws a chunk of bread at him and Techno kicks him under the table for trying to retaliate with “a knife, Wilbur, you better duck—” and Phil laments every decision he’s ever made.

It’s chaos and peace, colliding. It’s the calm after a storm, the fresh rubble plane ready to be built back up again.

It’s the best family dinner Tommy has ever had.

End Notes

that's a wrap. please leave your comments below and i will give you all the affection in the world.

friendly reminder - i am not trying to villainize anyone in this fic. all four of them have unreliable perceptions of the situation and none of them mean any real harm. please don't be mean <3

im currently in the THICK of midterms + stress right now so if my updating schedule is a little slower, please have grace. hopefully this 18k feeds you like your comments feed me. :)

Works inspired by this one

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